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Theatre in the Smart City: The Case of Pondicherry, South India

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Abstract

As culture becomes increasingly important in urban development, it is timely to examine ways in which cultural producers – including those whose activities that fall outside strict definitions of "cultural industries" – are using digital platforms to produce and promote their work. We examine here two contemporary theatre companies in the region of Pondicherry, South India: Indianostrum and Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts and Research. Both of these companies have substantial reputations throughout India and abroad for their innovative work rooted in the investigation of folk and classical performance forms. Nevertheless, institutional recognition of these artistic collectives as cultural industries that contribute to the territory's cosmopolitan image has been lacking. This neglect continues even at a moment when the city seeks to capitalize on culture and heritage to transform itself into a "global tourist destination", as per the goals of the Pondicherry Smart City mission launched in 2017. For these acclaimed theatre artists of international stature, who must work at the margins of economic stability because of the conditions for arts funding in India, the use of ICT facilitates obtaining performance opportunities and some funding for specific projects. However, digital platforms are not sufficient to secure the sponsorship needed on an ongoing basis to maintain and enhance the work of these artists and the performance spaces they have developed and curate.

Keywords: Cultural industries, contemporary theatre, Land-marking, crowdfunding platforms, India, Pondicherry.

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Résumé

Tandis que la culture tend à devenir un axe de plus en plus central des stratégies de développement urbain, il semble important d'analyser les modalités selon lesquels les producteurs culturels - incluant ceux dont les activités ne comptent pas parmi les industries culturelles les plus convoitées - ont recours aux outils fournis par les nouvelles technologies pour produire et promouvoir leur travail. Nous analysons ici deux compagnies de théâtre contemporain situées dans la région de Pondicherry en Inde du Sud : Indianostrum et Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts and Research. Toutes deux bénéficient d'une forte reconnaissance en Inde et à l'étranger pour leur travail innovant ancré dans des formes de performance populaires et classiques. Néanmoins, elles souffrent d'un manque de reconnaissance en tant qu'industries culturelles, même dans un moment où Pondicherry cherche à capitaliser sur la culture et le patrimoine dans le cadre de l'ambition de faire de la ville et sa région environnante une « destination touristique globale », objectif principal de la mission Smart City lancée en 2017. Pour ces artistes de stature internationale, qui doivent travailler en marge d'une stabilité économique pour pallier l'insuffisance de financement pour les arts en Inde et l'absence de politique culturelle de l'État, l'utilisation des TIC multiplie les opportunités de se produire et facilite l'obtention de financements pour des projets spécifiques. Pourtant, les plateformes digitales ne suffisent à elles seules ni à garantir le soutien nécessaire ni les bases leur permettant de maintenir et renforcer le travail de ces artistes et le fonctionnement de lieux de performance qu'ils ont eux-mêmes créés.

Mots-clés : industries culturelles ; théâtre contemporain ; marquage territorial ; plateformes de financement participatif ; Inde ; Pondicherry.

Introduction

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) has transformed the business of culture-making worldwide. With some exceptions, most of the literature about this phenomenon engages with socio-technological configurations in the US and Europe. Although it has long been acknowledged that the global circulation of media and technology encounters indigenization and complex culturally hybrid forms of consumption (Appadurai 1996), there is a relative paucity of research about the relationship between various digital platforms and cultural producers in other parts of the world, particularly in places on the postcolonial terrain that are not directly linked to the activities of multinational corporations.

Even more important, when this matter is discussed, both in contexts in the so-called "North" and "South", technology is frequently assumed to be essential for promoting cultural productions (Kulesz 2016). India, however, while so often made synonymous with the world of "IT", does not evenly

demonstrate the kind of technological use that would seem to make digital technology's role in culture to be inevitable. In most large Indian cities digital technology is limited to small initiatives or the clearly demarcated realms of transport or e-banking. Its use is even more limited in the case of second-tier cities, where infrastructure is lacking and where technology still looms on the horizon as the gateway to a promised land of market modernity.

This is the case for the city of Pondicherry[4] in South India, where neither government nor private stakeholders are providers or regular users of ICT. Nevertheless, Pondicherry is one of numerous places in India and the world where political discourse promotes digital technology as a major economic tool. This rhetoric culminated recently with the 2017 announcement of the Pondicherry Smart City Mission, a project initiated under an injunction from the central government's Union Ministry of Urban Development and to be realized until 2022. The plan's vision is primarily a "high-tech" version of the "entrepreneurial city", meaning a space welcoming of private businesses and their fruitful markets (Hollands 2008). Culture makes its legitimate claims in this city-of-the-future in as much as it can be translated into heritage and other goods attractive to both an entrepreneurial class and tourist consumption. Thus, exploring the role of digital technology across the various spheres of cultural production in an urban space such as Pondicherry is a line of inquiry that can reveal the partial and contradictory ways in which technology is promoted and adopted in spaces that have never had major links with an international economy of scale and that are not hubs of software development, outsourcing, or call centers as are some other Indian cities where technology has been the primary agent in urban development since India's entrance into the global economy in the 1990s.

Central to the exploration of culture and ICTs is considering the ways in which the Smart City plan identifies certain cultural practices as supportive of its mission of urban development and ignores others. The Pondicherry region – that includes the state of Tamil Nadu's surrounding villages and the international, intentional community of Auroville – supports a range of producers operating within specific "niche" markets that mobilize various forms of economic and cultural capital. In the discussion that follows we examine the ICT use of two contemporary theatre companies whose invisibility within the Smart City is paradoxical. First of all, both Indianostrum (IN) and Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts and Research (AS) are highly acclaimed and participate in networks of presenters, artists, and students on regional, national and international levels. Secondly, their practices cross

4. Although many Indian cities are referenced by indigenous nomenclature, in this city both the colonial "Pondicherry" and the Tamil "Puducherry" are used interchangeably.

elite worlds of "experimental art" and traditional performance practices that have easy translatability into "heritage." Thirdly, they have both developed institutional spaces in highly valuable, rapidly gentrifying areas already known as cultural "hot spots." Although these cultural producers would not fall within conventional constructions of so-called "classical" cultural industries, identifiable as they are more precisely under O' Connor's nomenclature of "arts"[5] (2000), Indianostrum and AS contribute to the cultural life of the city in ways that promote Pondicherry as a site that supports multiple "lifestyles", within a cosmopolitan urban space attractive to residents and visitors alike. Their activities, and their spatial inscription in the urban landscape, support the Smart City's desire to market Pondicherry as a destination. Their role in "place making" however is not acknowledged by the plan either discursively or with any resources.

The fact that the artists under consideration do not participate in major economies of scale allows us to consider their use of technology for the production and marketing of their cultural goods within the framework of the precariousness of cultural workers more generally in India, and artisanal and artistic labor in particular (Scrase 2003, 2009; Ithurbide 2016). We can ask how, and to what extent, such labor relies on ICT to access social networks and markets in light of a paucity of regular arts funding. We also secondarily examine how these theatre artists involve digital technology in their creative processes.

We start by offering a brief portrait of the context of Pondicherry city and its surroundings, as well as the Smart City Mission. We then situate our case studies within a broader context of performance making in India, including its historical relationship to nation building. The data we examine about the theatre companies and their uses of ICT is the result of ethnographic research

5. The definition of "cultural industry," as well as the analytical impulse to coin such a term, is at the center of a lively debate across economics, urban studies, and public policy studies, among other disciplines. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to address this concern comprehensively, it is worth acknowledging here Justin O'Connor's assertion that "whatever the definitional and linguistic difficulties, the use of 'cultural industries' itself indicates that the term is currently responding to some deep-seated and far-reaching need to handle transformations which go beyond short term tactical polemics and rhetorics" (O'Connor 2000). As many observers have argued, the attention to culture as an instrument of economic development is linked to comprehensive, long-term, structural shifts in the global, capitalist system and in particular, the increasing emphasis on services and the consumption of « experiences » and « lifestyles » This vision has become particularly influential for urban strategies and policies all over the world after the emergence of Richard Florida's seminal work which posits creative industries and the so-called « creative class » as the motors of urban regeneration. For critical analyses of this position see Pratt A., 2008, « Creative Cities: The Cultural Industries and the Creative Class », *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 90, 2 : 107-117. For an overview of the debate on cultural and creative industries, see for example : Flew T. & Cunningham S., 2010. Creative Industries After the First Decade of Debate, *The Information Society*, 26 :1-11.

undertaken by the authors from January-June 2018 under the umbrella of an ongoing research project called "The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu[6]".

I - Cultural Producers in the Context of the Pondicherry Smart City Mission

Pondicherry is a unique city in India, beginning with the fact that it was a French colony and received independence in 1962, years after the rest of India had been liberated from the British in 1947. A central area generally referred to as the French Quarter, constituted by boulevards located along a picturesque sea boardwalk, is home to Indo-French public and residential buildings, some of which have been restored in recent years. Street signs display names in French and Tamil and French cultural institutions are active in public life. A diasporic community of Tamil people live in France but maintain strong ties to Pondicherry through investment and business. Many foreigners, as well as people from other parts of India, live in the city, creating a market for goods such as baguette bread or cheese long before such goods became commonly available elsewhere in India. The city is also home to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, a powerful spiritual institution that exerts considerable political influence at local and national levels. In the outskirts is the international community of Auroville, founded in 1968 as an experiment to achieve human unity and build a new kind of socially and environmentally sustainable city. In 2017 Auroville inaugurated a Village Heritage Centre to honor local, rural Tamil culture. The Centre includes a craft training center, a cultural center, a plaza, dance and music verandah, an amphitheater, a village pond and an exhibition space. All of these unique locations and features make Pondicherry, and its outlying areas, a national and international tourist destination.

Pondicherry's urban growth, like all cities in India, has been rapid and chaotic, although it does not possess a major industrial cluster. The Smart City is in part a response to this scenario. In general, the "smart city" model refers to "the promotion of more 'intelligent', sustainable and inclusive cities through technological innovation" (Hollands 2008; Crivello 2015). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to interrogating the universal viability of this concept. Its transference to planning initiatives in the South has lacked "definitional precision", perhaps because of the "self-congratulatory" spirit of the plan (Hollands 2008). The case of Pondicherry is no different. Although

6. This project has been undertaken in the Social Sciences Department of the French Institute of Pondicherry. The authors would like to warmly thank Archita S. for her help during the interview conducted by Nancy Boissel-Cormier with T. Periyasamy at Indianostrum Theatre, November 23rd 2017.

launched in October 2017 with much expectation, the project has sparked debate amongst various stake holders about how to integrate efforts to provide new livelihood opportunities, improve hygiene, organize transportation, and build housing – all in the context of an urban space whose development until now has been uneven and unmanaged. Among the stakeholders are the French government, promoting French technical expertise through both national and international consulting firms.

The plan is ambitious; the Pondicherry government's stated aim is to "... redevelop the city into a global tourism destination by leveraging its heritage, cultural, spiritual and educational advantages; and enhance the quality of life of the citizens by providing efficient urban mobility, smart civic infrastructure, smart service delivery and participative decision making." (Pondicherry Municipality & Smart City Mission Transformation 2016). Thus, culture and heritage are among the targets for Smart City intervention. To examine the current state of cultural producers in the area and the ways in which their activities are or are not facilitated by available technologies would seem a timely mode of inquiry *en route* to making the Smart City viable.

The institutional discourse and position that has for long dominated the question of cultural heritage – both in terms of recognition and valorization – for Pondicherry's institutions is intimately related to the pervasive French colonial identity of the city. This has led to sporadic interventions in restoring or conserving specific buildings. In the meanwhile, several major sites of tangible and intangible Tamil heritage, both within and close to the municipality have been ignored or unrecognized and as a result, are vanishing. Pondicherry city's selective attention dedicated to conservation and promotion is exemplary of the conventional view of heritage as preservation of the past combined with a contradictory sense of colonial nostalgia (Bissel 2005). Generally speaking, challenges to this view posit heritage instead as an "active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take into the future" (Harrison 2013).

In contrast, a focus on a contemporary culture-related economy as a means for development is often forward looking. In cities throughout the world, including in India, urban planners and policy makers tout the potential of "creative industries" – defined as activities revolving around knowledge and innovation, such as IT and software, design, architecture, cinema or photography – for making cities attractive for tourists and a global class of elite workers (Peck 2005). The creative industry is also valued since it supposedly successfully converts cultural workers into entrepreneurs. This assumption is deeply suspect. For example, the globalization of Indian crafts has turned

marginalized cultural workers into impoverished entrepreneurs for the most part (Scrase 2003). Because innovation is narrowly interpreted and mostly in relation to a corporate economy of scale, governments tend to exclude from planning consideration of the diverse range of activities and practitioners that contribute to cultural production (Galloway & Dunlop 2007). As a result of this shortsightedness, there can be a host of possible services, commodities, and attractions that never realize their productive potential within agendas of city marketing.

Thus, the narrowness of the Pondicherry Smart City's vision, enhanced by the fact that the mission directly concerns a very limited area of the city – mainly the "Boulevard-town", defined as Area-Based Development (ABD)[7], is hardly exceptional. In considering the relationship between culture and economic growth, planners have largely restricted their consideration to the cinema industry. Presumably, Pondicherry would be an attractive film location given the singularity of its architecture, including the well-maintained compound facades that look out onto the streets in one small area of the city, which represents around 10 % of the total municipal area, hosting less than 15 % of its total population. In 2016 Pondicherry government officials appealed to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to open a Pondicherry branch of the Film Institute of Pune, one of the nation's leading film schools. On the table as well are proposals to launch a national film festival and develop a "film city". This infrastructure would aim to "encourage producers and film directors to shoot their film in Puducherry and will boost cinema tourism", according to Public Work Development Minister A. Namassivayam (Varma 2016). Realizing this vision would require considerable investment, however, as currently there is little in the way of infrastructure or trained personnel to support any substantial film activity. In its current state, with the exception of some low-budget endeavors that employ a few people working on outdated equipment, Pondicherry can hardly be said to be a popular geography for film shoots, even though the Tamil film industry, located in nearby Chennai, is among the largest in India.

Moreover, to give priority to cinema is to ignore other forms of cultural production in the region – some of them recent iterations of ancient practices – that might be well situated to contribute to Pondicherry's promotion of its heritage and consumptive offerings. Including existing cultural workers

7. According to the Central Government's Smart City Mission guidelines (http://smartcities.gov.in/content/innerpage/guidelines.php), every city has to elaborate a two-scale programme of intervention, namely an Area-Based proposal and a Pan-city proposal. In Pondicherry, reflection on the implementation of the Smart City Challenge prompts discussions between the governments of Pondicherry, a city-state, federal territory, and the larger state of Tamil Nadu. Because Pondicherry resides as a kind of enclave within Tamil Nadu, there is a strong need for collaborative planning.

would also allow for a vision of development that supports precarious forms of labor. A heterogeneous conglomeration of cultural workers struggles for economic stability in the region, linked variously to forms of institutional support. On the one hand, there are traditional craftspeople, such as terra cotta artisans, blacksmiths, and weavers, among others, many of whom occupy low social status within the hierarchical system of caste and frequently work within informal household units of production. This population has to some extent been a target for governmental welfare programs. Development schemes aim to encourage innovation and creativity as ways "to make them [cultural workers] more employable, improving the ease of doing business, and strengthening intellectual property rights" (CIS 2016). On the other hand, there are contemporary artists, with varying degrees of "professionalization" and links to formal art markets. Increasingly the outskirts of Pondicherry are becoming a home for artists relocating from big cities to escape pollution, noise, and other hazards. Gallery spaces and their accompanying publics, as well as supplies, remain scant in the area and so most artists continue to rely on curators, platforms, and buyers in India's major urban centers. The performing arts are particularly vulnerable; presentation opportunities are relatively few and not often lucrative. Theatre, moreover, is subject to considerable economic duress as it constitutes an endeavor that involves multiple people working for longer periods of time and has space requirements for rehearsal and presentation.

This does not mean that theatrical activity need be dismissed as an expensive practice with a niche market that does not translate into any benefit for Pondicherry or neighboring Tamil Nadu. Both the IN and AS companies have significant profiles with respect to artistic recognition and insertion into national and international networks of artists and presenters. This generates a degree of cultural capital one might not expect to find in a cultural periphery like Pondicherry. Of special note here is the fact that both companies build upon traditional performance practices, even as they work within experimental frameworks that investigate relationships between the performing body, mythology, and social identities. They regularly host traditional performers for their own training purposes as well as presenting their performances. In this way their work is deeply connected with an agenda to support the sustainability of intangible Tamil and other South Indian heritage. Furthermore, and significantly, both collectives have established spaces within land marked areas that receive large numbers of visitors from India and abroad. It is possible to argue, therefore, that the activities of these theatre companies are entirely relevant to Pondicherry's place-making efforts.

II - The Context of Contemporary Performance in India

The importance of IN and AS must be situated within the broader context of contemporary art making in India, including how local spaces are linked to national level politics. It is widely known that the Indian subcontinent is home to a tremendous variety of performance practices elaborated in ritual, on concert stage, and in everyday life. The antecedents of practices seen today have since colonial times animated fantasies about the colorful nature of the region's diverse cultures and have prompted visits of European and American artists seeking inspiration for their own "exotic" productions (Erdman 1996). In the colonial period performance was a prioritized object for the scrutiny and disciplining of the colonial legal apparatus, with some dance and theatre practices made the targets of prohibition (Balme 2015; Soneji 2012). The "modernization" of traditional forms took place during the first half of the twentieth century largely in response to their reinvention by upper caste elites and the interest in the construction of a national culture on the part of independence movement leaders (Meduri 2005; O'Shea 2007; Peterson and Soneji 2008).

After India's Independence in 1947, culture's importance in the creation of the new nation was formalized with a project of institutionalization. The first Planning Commission, under the governance of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, insisted on the age, the specificity, and the diversity of Indian culture, as well as the need to protect and value it for both economic and identity-related purposes. In 1950, the first Minister of Education, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, founded the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) as an autonomous governmental organization. The mission of the ICCR is to forge cultural links and exchanges between India and foreign countries. Following that, the Sangeet Natak Academi (SNA) was established in 1953 as the national institute for dance, drama, and music, followed in subsequent years by other institutions. This process of the state instrumentalization of culture has contributed to the strong association of particular performing arts with state territories as well as their frozen classification into "classical" or "folk", – ironically a genre determination that is not indigenous to India. This process was never without opposition; several artists criticized the government's efforts to take what were often ritual forms out of their original contexts in order to contribute to a nationalist project (Cherian, 2009).

Although traditional forms have been highly responsive to colonial and transnational forces and have adapted continuously to social and economic change, scholars and popular thinking remain committed to the distinction between "traditional" and "contemporary." The question is one that preoccupies

practitioners themselves, as demonstrated by the lively discussions about what constitutes the "contemporary" in public forums on art (Menon 2018). For the purpose of this essay we identify the "contemporary" less as a marker of time and more as an aesthetic strategy that seeks to investigate the form and purpose of performance and may respond to social issues. Contemporary performance lives along a kind of spectrum with practices more closely tied to traditional vocabularies and modes of production on the one side, and highly experimental, deconstructions of form on the other. Both IN and AS redefine classical and folk conventions as they draw from those sources in creating hybrid expressions that integrate Indian and transnational materials. In so doing their work defies the impulse to construct an opposition between "tradition" and "modernity." The audiences for this kind of art making that has an investigative, experimental orientation, are primarily urban and highly literate. This obligates theatre collectives working in this way to travel both to other cities in India where they can encounter such audiences, often at festivals, or else to seek touring possibilities abroad.

It is important to clarify that much of the work categorized as "contemporary" by presenters and audiences in India is highly interdisciplinary in nature. This tendency is an organic continuation of ancient conceptions of performance. In the Indian context "dance", "theatre", and "music" are not regarded as wholly distinct and even the visual and literary arts have similar orientations with respect to ideas of artistic reception (Vatsyayan 1968). The Sanskrit performance manual, the *Natyashastra*, elaborates a theory of "natya" in which spectacle, movement, acting, and sonic and visual elements combine within a dramatic structure that can entail both narrative as well as abstract and decorative representation. Even as scholars, critics, and presenters may reiterate the Western differentiation made between forms such as "dance", and "theatre", the work of artists such as Indianostrum and Adishakti do not settle easily into these categories.

IN and AS occupy a peculiar position with respect to seeking support from the Indian Government's Ministry of Culture, whose various institutions at the national and regional levels constitute prime patrons on the cultural landscape. Because of the history of the role of culture in postcolonial nation building, state funding of the arts in India continues to privilege the traditional arts, positing heritage against innovation (Bharucha 1993). Traditional forms may be seen as vessels for a timeless, Hindu Indian identity, while "modern" practices are viewed as vague products of Western influence (Dharwadker 2005). Moreover, today the ICCR and SNA, as well as the regional South Cultural Zone institution, give only punctual and limited help for the creation of a new play, or a defrayal of transport costs to allow artists to tour abroad.

There is no specific professional status for performing artists in India as can be found abroad in countries such as France. Artists must secure other means for their survival, whether from family resources or working at another job (Boissel-Cormier 2018). As a result, practitioners of contemporary theatre have needed to explore various avenues.

Since India's opening to the global economy in the early 90s, a process that has gained momentum in recent years with the embrace of neoliberalism, new forms of patronage have arisen through private foundations, corporate responsibility initiatives, and cultural diplomacy funding from European embassies. Such conduits of resources are competitive and may come with stipulations. More popular forms of theatre that draw broader audiences with an expectation of "entertainment", especially in places such as Mumbai that have a tradition of pay-to-see theatre, may also derive some funding from ticket sales. However, even for these companies – most of which don't employ actors or technicians for long periods – the income generated by audiences is not sufficient – especially given the expense of theatre rentals. In the case of Tamil Nadu, there is no long – established custom of paying to see a performance and therefore audiences are reluctant to do so, especially for theatre in the Tamil language. The same is not the case for cinema halls where buying tickets never has been questioned. All of this is to say that the kind of precarious situation that IN and AS confront is a generalized condition for many contemporary theatre artists.

III - Indianostrum: The Preservation of Tamil Theatre in the Postcolonial, Digital Age

(ICT) is an ally in the development of contemporary theatre companies in India. The use of these latest technologies, and especially social media, allows theatre groups to make their work known by a larger audience and to be aware of the latest events in connection with their work. The reliance on such platforms, however, demonstrates the absence of government arts financing. It also raises questions about the relative access to ICT depending upon a group's location and ability to communicate in English with people outside the Tamil-speaking region. These complexities can be appreciated in considering the case of Indianostrum (IN), a professional contemporary theatre troupe founded in 2007 by Koumarane Valavane. The company is situated in Pondicherry's colonial quarter where the stakes around culture making are growing in light of the Smart City project. IN is characterized by its strong ties with Tamil vernacular culture; its mission is "to revive traditional folk theatre of Tamil Nadu" and "save the declining culture and heritage of folk theatre

art forms" (Anantharam 2018). At the same time, IN has a relationship with Théâtre du Soleil, a French theatre company of great repute.

Photo 1 - Front door of Indianostrum next to a trendy café on Romain Rolland Street, in a neighborhood commonly known as « White Town. » During the colonial era the building was used for a time as a cinema hall, the Pathé Ciné Familial (credit: N. Bautès, 2019)

IN's location in the neighborhood that has the most colonial architecture is meaningful at a moment when the city hopes to capitalize on its built heritage. Since 2010 IN has rented a former cinema from the colonial era, Pathé Ciné Familial, which now belongs to Our Lady of Angels Church[8]. Rev. Fr. Michael John gave the cinema on a ten-year lease in part to preserve the building. Although the Smart City project could see the company's use of the space in line with its goals, the renegotiation of the lease will depend on the goodwill of the Church. The company looks to its popularity and reputation as a hope for keeping the space needed for its work. Thus, the predicament of IN having its own rehearsal and performance locale on an ongoing basis depends in part upon its maintaining a profile on social media, where it builds a presence based upon its relation with both Tamil tradition and the French avant-garde.

8. Interview with K. Valavane conducted by V. Vulliez at Indianostrum Theatre, Pondicherry, audio recording, 6 April 2018.

Director Valavane is a French national of Tamil origin who during a ten-years' stay in France apprenticed with the highly acclaimed Theatre du Soleil. The company's director, Ariane Mnouchkine, shifted her Ecole Nomade workshop location from Delhi to Pondicherry in 2015, solidifying a collaborative relationship with Indianostrum[9]. Simultaneously, the theatre strives to preserve Tamil heritage. Actors learn folk forms such as therukoothu, devar attam or oyil attam[10]. Valavane enrolls therukoothu artists in his productions while organizing workshops with them.

This new geography of production for village, folk forms initiates a temporary migration of rural artists to the city. While the transportation of folk art to the contemporary stage promotes the emancipation of certain performers, it also reveals the precariousness of the many other village artists who do not have such relationships with urban cultural producers and audiences. It should also be noted that those who do have such opportunities must compromise on traditional methods and formats to conform to the needs and demands of more "elite" art making contexts. For example, in addition to the art of therukoothu that inspired Ariane Mnouchkine's last production[11], IN works with artists of katta bommalattam. The physical demands of this puppet theatre combined with a lack of financial incentive threatens its imminent disappearance. IN organized workshops with masters for its own actors and bought a full set of puppets in line with its mission of propagating forms teetering on extinction. Without doubt, its appropriation of this art form at the service of its own productions has brought benefits to the puppeteers. However, this has come at the cost of radical changes to the form to allow for its quick transmission, the participation of women actors, and accessibility by a broad audience largely ignorant about original performance codes.

Ironically, given its location in a former cinematic space, IN perceives its practice and its engagements with Tamil tradition as a form of resistance against the overwhelming power of film and television. Valavane recognizes that in India, "almost nobody can live exclusively with theatre [as a profession]. The cinema eventually absorbs you." Contrary to the theatre, film and television offer jobs for actors. These media also take audiences away from live performance. According to the puppet Master T. Periyasamy:

9. This collaboration which will give rise to a series of representations in France, then a proposal of residency for a creation in 2018. In addition, the theatre hosts interns from French schools as *Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique* (CNSAD) and *École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* (EnsAD), as well as Montpellier and Paris Sorbonne-Nouvelle universities.

10. *Therukoothu*, *devar attam* or *oyil attam* are forms of folk dance/theatre of Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, *therukoothu* practice was passed from father to son in villages. Very recently, a few women have learned and practice this art.

11. During the *Ecole nomade* in 2015, Ariane Mnouchkine's troupe collaborated with *therukoothu* artists. Her last production, *Une chambre en Inde* was created at Indiasnostrum in November 2016.

> Television was a major threat to the art form. When villages didn't have cinemas, bommalattam was a major entertainment that people enjoyed. People sat on floors and watched all night. Cinema had little impact, but it still did not kill it. But TV killed the art form after it came everywhere and people could watch whatever they want[12].

Facing the double threat from mass media and the absence of regular patronage, IN is compelled to use digital spaces to promote its artistic activity. Because the connection with Theatre du Soleil brings international performance opportunities, especially in France, IN travels frequently to play for foreign audiences. When in residence in Pondicherry the company's audience is predominantly made up of members of the French diaspora, tourists, and local artists[13] who chat amongst themselves and drink tea while waiting in the tiny lobby space before a show starts. These consumers pay what the company calls a "donation" of between 200-500 Rs per ticket[14], depending upon a person's stated economic ability. These costs are about all the Pondicherry market for theatre will bare as spectators can view performances for free on some other stages and do not, generally speaking, have the habit of paying. The money from both local and international performances is insufficient, however, given the infrastructural costs of maintaining an old building and Valavane's commitment to paying salaries. IN theatre includes nine permanent performers, four women and five men, all of whom receive a monthly payment. This is unusual in India where most actors of live theatre and dancers are paid per performance. There is no state sponsorship that acknowledges the professional status of the actors or provides support for such theatrical labor. As a result, there have been times when such costs were impossible to bear. One such occasion came in 2017 when the company was rehearsing a piece soon to go on tour in France. IN initiated a crowdfunding drive[15] to cover the cost of rehearsals that preceded the tour but was unable to meet its target. As for the actors, the modesty of the salary can compel them to take other assignments. ICT allows them to stay connected as a working team even at long-distance.

The use of ICT has led to success, however, in heightening the visibility of the theatre's work. Smartphones and especially applications such as

12. Interview, 23 November 2017.

13. Data about Indianostrum is drawn from ethnographic observations conducted as part of Boissel-Cormier's research on the company's activities since 2017, as well as from an interview with Koumarane Valavane, in June 2018.

14. According to the official currency rate as per November 2018 (1 euro = 83.43 Indian Roupies), this represented between 2,40 and 6 Euros.

15. https://www.ketto.org/fundraiser/indianostrum?mdAB=B, accessed on June 4th 2018. While they have not been able to reach their target amount through this fundraiser, they continue to invite people to send offline contributions by cash/cheque/online transfer.

Facebook, Messenger, Twitter and Whatsapp are essential in advertising the work of the company locally, nationally and internationally. The Facebook page of the company, the first result shown in Google about the theatre, was the main medium for information before the creation of the official website of the company in July 2018[16]. Valavane sees social media as an efficient way to communicate:

> The Facebook page and the e-mailing have contributed to making our work known, to staying in touch with our public. Generally, people hear about our work through the others. They use then the social media to know about our activities[17].

However, he also says that "the first human contact, either by the press or by the posters"[18] is necessary. Since he perceives posters as crucial for attracting the many national and international tourists that come to Pondicherry, the company willingly incurs the high costs for printing and distribution.

ICT is also indispensable for obtaining performance opportunities. IN continuously monitors the internet to know of festivals and to send application materials, including links to video material. Appearances at festivals is important not just for bringing the company's physical presence to stages outside Pondicherry, but also for increasing its web presence. That was the case for the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards and Festival 2018 (META 2018) which happened between April 13-18, 2018 in Delhi. The company participated in the competition with their original play, *Karuppu,* "a dance-drama based on the age-old *Dravidian* cultural rituals depicting a universe that absorbs all imbalances like a black hole from which rebirth of everything anew is possible"[19]. Visiting the annual award festival's web page gives a clear idea of the importance of social media in the contemporary theatre scene in India: "Over 240 new stories, 2 266 188 Facebook impressions, 8 Million Twitter impressions, 465 Instagram followers[20]." Connecting IN social media platforms to META's vast world of virtual advertisement and online ticketing allowed the company to raise its own profile.

16. http://indianostrum.org/
17. Interview with K. Valavane conducted by N. Boissel-Cormier, E-mail, June 1st 2018.
18. *Ibid.*
19. http://metawards.com/blog/karuppu, accessed on June 4th 2018.
20. http://metawards.com/, accessed on June 4th 2018.

Photo 2 - Ruchi Raveendran performing *Karuppu*, a dance-drama about the movement of the ultimate Purusha and Prakriti energies through the birth, destruction and rebirth of the universe. Indianostrum Theatre, Pondicherry, (credit: Indianostrum, 2018)

IV - Adishakti's Curatorial Initiatives

Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts and Research (AS) is a significant institution both for the experimental work and curatorial initiatives it fosters. The resident company's artistic reputation in India and abroad, as well as its hosting of acclaimed theatre artists, choreographers, and musicians from around the world, contributes to a sense of Pondicherry as a cosmopolitan location. As the producer of an art form that is not lucrative, however, AS's economic position is fragile in spite of its success with grants. The need for sustainability has motivated the company to find creative means of surviving, including teaching and space rentals. In recent years AS members' efforts to cultivate a base of individual donors have been systematized through email, the internet, and social media. They expanded their use of ICT productively in 2017 through crowdfunding, a new platform in India, to secure resources as well as to present artists in AS's annual festival[21]. The festival can be seen as part of the "eventrification" of contemporary performance in India, raising Pondicherry's visibility in the art world as the location of a mainstage. At the

21. Data about Adishakti's marketing strategies is drawn from ethnographic observations conducted as part of Pillai's research on the company's activities since 2015, as well as from an interview conducted by Pillai with Adishakti member, Nimmy Raphel, in June 2018.

same time, the savvy use of internet marketing does not signify that AS has incorporated ICT into the creative process, even in a time when more artists explore the possibilities of live-virtual interfaces.

Founded in 1981 by director and playwright, Veenapani Chawla, AS's interdisciplinary, devised works, often reflecting on mythological themes, are the result of years of research into the contemporary application of acting techniques drawn from traditional performance and movement practices such as the ancient Sanskrit theatre of *kudiyattam* and the South Indian martial art, *kalaripayattu*. In 1993 Chawla moved the company to Pondicherry. She shifted again in 2000 to the rural outskirts nine kilometers away from the city and adjacent to the intentional community of Auroville. Here, through a variety of grants from sources such as the Indian industrial company Tata and the Ford Foundation, she built a performing arts campus in a bucolic setting that, like Auroville, is the result of efforts in reforestation and using environmentally friendly building technologies and materials. In addition to a salt-water swimming pool and guesthouses with indigenous Tamil design elements, the Sir Ratan Tata Koothu Kovil theatre[22], with a 30x40 foot wood-paneled stage and seating capacity of 120, was built according to ancient specifications outlined in the Sanskrit performance manual, the *Natyashastra*. Given the proximity of AS to Pondicherry, the Auroville area's inclusion in the city's tourist promotions, and the continuous traffic of residents and visitors between these points, AS forms part of the greater Pondicherry imaginary and its cultural economy.

AS must thrive in conditions of perpetual financial instability. In the context of what is by nature a labor-intensive art form that involves the time of multiple actors and technicians, AS's rehearsal budget is especially high since the creative process is slow. The company's most recent play, *Bali*, was made with seven actors in residence for three years. Furthermore, AS is economically vulnerable because of its physical infrastructure and the 20 employees – most of whom come from local villages – required for upkeep and running the office. Maintaining the campus is essential for AS to continue its regular acting workshops that constitute a primary source of its income since performance opportunities are inevitably irregular and not sufficiently lucrative (Pillai 2017).

In 2014 an unexpected development propelled AS into a new phase of its development; Veenapani Chawla, the company's founder and artistic director,

22. The theatre is named after Ratan Naval Tata, industrialist and former chairman of the global business conglomerate Tata Sons (previously Tata Group). In Tamil, Koothul refers to various forms of dance-theatre, while Kovil, literally "Residence of god", is the Tamil term designating a Hindu temple built in the Dravidian architectural tradition.

suddenly passed away. The shock and grief in the wake of her absence suggested urgent questions: how to carry on her legacy and how to further energize AS's journey to self-sufficiency. Chawla's reputation as a world-class art maker had attracted funding in the past. Her foresight had fostered not just the artistic work but also the infrastructure that supported her commitment to forging a welcoming space for "creating opportunities for artist engagement and community building" (Adishakti 2018b). It was in light of this vision that the company spontaneously launched the first Remembering Veenapani Festival (RVF) in April 2015, Chawla's birthday month, to present theatre, dance, and music from all over India. After the first round's success, AS organized for the event to become annual and in 2017 shifted the timing to February to benefit from the cooler weather. The event has grown steadily; the company estimates that in 2018 more than 2,000 people sat for the fourteen performances spread over one month (Raphel 2018).

Photo 3 - Adishakti Theatre's Sir Ratan Tata Koothu Kovil was built to ancient performance specifications and hosts artists from around India and the world, in addition to serving as the resident company's primary rehearsal space, (credit: Adishakti, 2018)

RVF is one of many arts events that now take place throughout the year in India. There is precedence in long-standing festivals such as the Madras

Music Academy Festival that has showcased classical music and dance since the 1920s and the National School of Drama's Bharat Rang Mahotsav theatre festival running since 1999. Some festivals that have emerged in recent years present visual and performing arts, such as Serendipity in Goa which started in 2014 or the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which began in 2012 and is India's largest exhibition of art. Other festivals give primacy to a particular art form. For example, March Dance in Chennai as of 2017 and The Pickle Factory in Kolkata starting in 2018 showcase dance and are curated by dance artists. These occasions and RVF must be seen in the context of the global phenomenon of the "eventrification" of contemporary art, exemplified most spectacularly by the increase of biennials (Jones 2017). Direct benefits for artists include being able to present work without theatre rental costs and encountering broader audiences. Throughout the world such events, like museums, are embraced by urban planners as colorful strategies for urban renewal and income for local service providers (Hamnett and Shoval 2003; Richards and Palmer 2010). It remains to be seen, however, whether the Smart City initiative will capitalize on AS's activities in its promotion of Pondicherry as a tourist destination.

As explained in 2018 by Nimmy Raphel, long-time actor in the company who has assumed several administrative responsibilities, the first round of RVF was organized very quickly in the months immediately following Chawla's death. Artists covered much of their own travel costs and performed for free in homage to Chawla. Food and lodging at AS, however, were provided. By the third iteration of the event AS was prepared to reimburse all of artists' travel expenses from the income generated through its regular activities while still honoring its tradition of no charge for tickets. The "art for free" stance is significant; attendance at any AS hosted show will attest to the inclusion of local, village people among its audiences, many of whom might not have disposable income. This distinguishes AS from other stages in big cities where the consumers for contemporary performance and other forms of "high art" are almost exclusively literate, middle and upper-middle class urbanites.

This left to resolve paying participants, another principle to which AS was ethically committed. The company had concluded that resources such as Facebook and Instagram were effective yet inefficient since AS could not afford a dedicated marketing person and tasks of this sort fell to the actors. Moreover, most people review social media in the evening, precisely during the company's main rehearsal hours. As a result, the actor-producers could not engage in the kind of "flooding" of communications required, especially at the outset of a campaign.

Raphel began a period of research. On advice from Mumbai-based QTP, a theatre and arts management company that produces its own work as well

as organizes events, AS opted for crowdfunding. This mode of fundraising has become an increasingly popular option for creative projects in India (Thomas 2016) in the context of a society obsessed with start-ups, branding, and innovation (Gooptu 2013; Munjal 2016). Despite some challenges with payment gateways, over a dozen platforms have surfaced in India in recent years riding "the rising wave of entrepreneurship and the internet to become magnets for people looking for money — and those willing to donate for a cause" (Satchitandand 2014). Although some observers in the US have argued that crowdfunding is inherently a threat to the cause of public spending (Brabham 2016; Moskowitz 2016), it does provide an immediate solution for art makers. Even proponents of traditional Indian performance forms see a future in this mode of fundraising (Press Trust of India 2017). Moreover, this digital marketing platform might offer artists some agency over the production of their work in a moment when the ruling national government party, the BJP, promotes Hindu nationalist versions of Indian culture at odds with the critical stance towards religion of much contemporary performance[23]. Yet this sense of the freedom of expression and democratization of the arts linked to digital fundraising should not be overestimated given the current government's growing concern with internet policing and its increasing capacity for censorship in cyberspace (Iyengar 2017; Panday 2016; Prakash 2011).

AS chose to run campaigns on platforms with an interest in social and creative causes, first in 2017 through BitGiving and later in 2018 on Ketto. Raphel states that the campaign was organized by AS's assertion that "being artists ourselves we know how important it is to get paid". It further capitalized on donors' positive response to knowing that their funds went directly to artists as opposed to production costs. It took time to master the best uses of crowdfunding's potential, but AS outreached its target of 500-600 000 Rs. in both years[24].

AS's embrace of ICT does not extend into the studio, however. Its latest work, *Bali*, directed by Raphel and which premiered in April 2018, was built with as little use of technology as possible. This decision conforms with AS's artistic commitment to a performance language that centers around the live presence of the performer and is highly physical. Raphel explained, "If I am to watch a piece of theatre, I am there because I can see a live human body." Yet there are also practical considerations. In addition to purchasing equipment, a large technical staff is needed. Moreover, the facilities available in most

23. This is particularly a concern for artists working with mythological material that religious nationalists claim is factual in their official rewriting of history – a project currently spearheaded by the Ministry of Culture (D'Monte 2018; Jain and Lasseter 2018).

24. In november 2008, this represented between 6000 and 7100 euros.

Indian theatres are limited. At a moment when many avant-garde performers worldwide incorporate cell phones and the internet into their work, most theatres in India do not have infrastructure to utilize any kind of cutting-edge design to its fullest potential. Raphel also questions the reliability of this kind of stage craft; the risk of something going wrong is high in India where power and internet fluctuations are common.

Photo 4 - Actors Vinay Kumar and Rijul Ray perform in Adishakti Theatre's *Bali*, a retelling of a classic story from the epic *Ramayana*, (credit: Adishakti, 2018)

Thus, AS's use of ICT is selective in accordance with its creative agenda and perceptions about available infrastructure in India. It is clear that for this company, like many in India, digital platforms are replacing exclusive reliance on state or other forms of patronage. The need to engage in marketing has accorded these artists a certain degree of freedom from bureaucratic procedures and institutional expectations, just as it has allowed the efficient organization of a significant public, cultural event in a way that might not be possible given both state and corporate grant funding cycles. It does not, however, resolve the ultimate precarity of these artists as crowdfunding brings diminishing returns if overused. To survive AS must still seek opportunities to support its infrastructural maintenance and labor-intensive creative process.

Conclusion

Through a qualitative ethnographic study of two theatre companies in and outside the city of Pondicherry, this essay has sought to highlight various aspects of the relation between culture, urban development, and digital technology. Building on Appadurai's now classic work on globalization (1996), in which he argues that the distribution and use of technology is disjunctive with respect to the movement of capital, media, people, and ideas, our work seeks to understand how "technoscapes" operate unevenly across various forms of cultural labor within a relatively small geography. Technological appropriation must be seen in the context of how cultural workers are linked to major urban development initiatives, such as the Smart City. IN and AS are not promoted as part of this major initiative's purview. However, their location – one within the historical quarter which is an epicenter of tourist activity and home for French expatriates, and the other in a place known worldwide for its alternative lifestyle – demonstrate and further encourage the region's slow but progressive agglomeration of small cultural initiatives that make the region an attractive destination.

If the Pondicherry Smart Mission intends to court cinema for its various economic outcomes, including employment opportunities, then it stands to reason that other forms of artistic labor could contribute to Pondicherry's city marketing. As our study of these well-known theatre companies reveals, however, such enterprises are vulnerable and could benefit from state support. It is within this context that we witness theatre makers selectively and strategically using technology for their marketing and curatorial purposes, without extensive investment of resources in exploring such use. Digital technology clearly offers a tool for promoting the development of contemporary performance, including experimental work that engages with local, traditional art forms. Yet the digital cannot solve structural problems associated with the field. Without any major policy support targeted either at the level of territory, companies or individual artists, this form of labor remains precarious and must struggle to legitimize itself as an economic activity. In light of this, our case studies demonstrate that digital policy and use in the context of cultural production must be thought about alongside tourism, social welfare programs, and state sponsorship of the arts.

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